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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Bärnthaler, R. (2020). Conflict, Controversy, Compromise, and Compression: The Pragmatics of Transdisciplinary (Development) Projects. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, *13*(2), 193-210. https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-0038

Conflict, Controversy, Compromise, and Compression: The Pragmatics of Transdisciplinary (Development) Projects

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▸ Bärnthaler, R. (2020). Conflict, controversy, compromise, and compression: The pragmatics of transdisciplinary (development) projects. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 13*(2). 193-210.

Drawing upon qualitative interviews, this article narrates some central controversies and conflicts that scholars in the field of 'development' face in their daily work. Based on how such conflicts and controversies have been reconstructed, I place them in a discourse on transdisciplinarity, drawing into question the claims to authority and novelty around the term 'transdisciplinarity' that Western institutions have attributed to themselves in recent years. I also address the question of collaboration: How can transdisciplinary projects deal with the fact of pluralism, on the one hand, and the necessity to work towards shared problem definitions, and strategies, on the other hand? In this context, I make a case against transdisciplinarity's oft-cited conceptions of harmony, comprehensiveness, totality, and unity; and a case for conflict, compromise, partiality, and joint contextual strategies. The "art of deliberation" thus replaces the notion of transcendence as a central competence of transdisciplinary scholars.

Keywords: Development Research; Disagreement; Pluralism; Situated Judgments; Transdisciplinarity

www.seas.at doi 10.14764/10.ASEAS-0038

INTRODUCTION

If there is one experience that transdisciplinary scholars share, it is the fact of heterogeneity. This was certainly true for the project *Fostering Multi-Lateral Knowledge Networks of Transdisciplinary Studies to Tackle Global Challenges* (KNOTS), upon which this special issue reflects. Evolving around issues of transdisciplinary research and teaching, KNOTS was *inter alia* characterized by a diversity of actors (both extra-scientific and scientific, the latter occupying different academic positions and career stages), disciplines, institutions, and regional contexts. A shared concern, nevertheless, evolved around the ambiguous notion of 'development'. The resulting problématique is, thus, not difficult to locate: Facing the fact of pluralism in transdisciplinary projects, how is collaboration possible in practice? How to jointly define a shared problem or goal and produce practically relevant knowledge and common strategies in the face of a diversity of (epistemic) cultures and life-worlds?

To answer these questions, I empirically reconstructed situations of disagreement to learn about the kind of deliberations made and decisions taken in such situations. I have been personally involved in KNOTS from the outset, in both

scientific (e.g., lectures, fieldtrips, and the development of a teaching manual) and administrative (e.g., program planning, finances, and documentation) capacities. My main role has been in the area of project management. The arguments in this article are certainly influenced by these experiences. The data that I draw upon explicitly, however, derive from individual, face-to-face, semi-structured guideline-based expert interviews (oral), which I conducted over two weeks in 2018 during a summer school in Chiang Mai (Thailand), and subsequently explored through qualitative content analysis (cf., Gläser & Laudel, 2010).

Seven (senior) academic members of KNOTS were interviewed (three from universities in Thailand and four from universities in Austria and Germany). Their disciplinary backgrounds ranged from sociology, ethnology, anthropology, and political science to global history. Before conducting the interviews, I asked the interviewees to imagine, describe, and prepare a familiar situation reflecting their everyday practice as researchers. This situation concerned a scientific disagreement with a colleague within the interviewee's field of expertise, whom the interviewee broadly considered as well-informed and professional as themselves. Such simulations are particularly useful when an interview's central questions prove difficult to answer directly or explicitly (Patton, 1990, 2002). To guarantee anonymity, I use abbreviations for each interviewee: Fe/Ma refers to sex, AuGe/Th refers to the region (Austria/Germany or Thailand), and the numbers refer to the sequence of interviews taken.[1]

This article proceeds as follows: Based on the interviews, I will (1) sketch out central controversies and conflicts that scholars working in the field of development face in their daily work. Subsequently, I will discuss (2) how the specific reconstructions of these conflicts and controversies can be placed in the discourse on transdisciplinarity. At this stage, the definition of transdisciplinarity is deliberately kept minimalist[2] and evolves around three practices, which can take different forms: collaboration among different scientific disciplines, the involvement of extra-scientific actors, and the production of socially relevant outcomes.[3] Finally, I will (3) turn to the question of collaboration: what preconditions enable collaborative work? How can transdisciplinary projects deal with the fact of pluralism on the one hand, and the necessity to work towards shared problem definitions and strategies on the other hand?

VIGNETTES OF CENTRAL CONFLICTS AND CONTROVERSIES IN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

During the interviews, five major topics of disagreement were reconstructed. The first concerns the fact that most development research evolves in the Global North,

1 I would like to emphasize that this article is *about* transdisciplinary development projects (its conflicts, controversies, and forms of collaboration). This, however, does not imply that my study is (or even should be) itself transdisciplinary. Thus, neither the interviewees nor extra-scientific actors were involved in the analysis.

2 This is also to accommodate the fact that, within KNOTS, we were "neither able to develop a shared definition nor a shared understanding of transdisciplinarity" (KNOTS, 2019) within the three-year project lifespan. Hence, while some problems discussed in this article will be unique to scholars engaged in transdisciplinary development projects, others will relate also to those engaged in multi- or inter-disciplinary studies. The analysis of these commonalities and differences, however, is beyond the present scope.

3 Scholars who, to my understanding, embrace these three practices in the context of transdisciplinarity are Kotter & Balsiger (1999), Scholz & Marks (2001), and Lawrence (2004).

and whether (or under which circumstances) it is possible for scholars to conduct research under these conditions. A European female researcher summarized the major discussion points aptly:

> What does it mean that we as Western researchers have the opportunity to go to [the Global South] and do our research? And what does it actually mean that it's hardly ever the other way around? . . . That's a fundamental question: As in how far are we allowed to do that? . . . Research has always to do with interpretation. And how much more difficult, or how much more impossible perhaps, is such an interpretation if one faces a different cultural context, if one faces a language problem? How can interpretation actually happen at all? How many steps are you actually removed from what was told? (FeAuGe1)

A researcher from a Thai university continued in a similar vein:

> Often people don't see the legacy of what's happened before in a certain place, . . . the importance of historical and locational specificities. . . . I just don't feel that one can compare one place with another. . . . And if you want to engage in a place, then knowing that place very well is very important. You can't generalize. (MaTh4)

The second topic addressed the usefulness and appropriateness of practical (e.g., political) interventions in the subject-matter of one's research. While some interviewees (all the Thai scholars, and one from Austria/Germany) identified themselves explicitly as academic activists, others expressed skepticism in this regard:

> We clearly have different positions [in the department]. For example, my colleague has a leftist and at the same time a strong activist position. . . . And I think that too activist positions are problematic, because they conflict with the scientific attitudes that try to be rather detached, not from social reality, but from the impact on social reality, from politics. (MaAuGe6)

The third thread of disagreements epitomized the widely discussed trend from structural theories towards more actor-oriented approaches[4] in development research (cf., Schuurman, 2007). To be more precise, the interviews did not suggest a significant decrease of structural theories (which does not mean that this is in fact not the case), but instead expressed the conflict between structure- and agency-oriented approaches:

> Many theorists believe that you depend upon what the structural conditions force upon you. But for me, agency has the power to change the phenomena around you. (FeTh3)

4 The debate over the primacy of structural or agency-oriented theories concerns the question whether human behavior can be better explained via socialization (i.e., social structures as recurrent patterned arrangements that influence, or in radical understandings, determine, human behavior) or autonomy (i.e., free agents acting according to free choice).

> Well, some approaches focus more on structural conditions . . . . You have regulation theorists. You have Marxist critical approaches . . . . And then you have approaches that are much more actor-centered. . . . And it is precisely this connection – to look at this structural level, but also, so to speak, informed by the actor level – that would be something that is complementary to think about. And this is done too little. (FeAuGe1)

A fourth point of discussion was to what extent different disciplines can work together and incorporate insights from others. The increasing dominance of neoclassical economic thinking in development research (Bernstein, 2007) was a predominant concern. Several interviewees (FeAuGe2, FeTh3, MaTh4) stressed that neoclassical economics has occupied such a hegemonic position in the field that it has become difficult to enter into processes of collaboration with its proponents.

Lastly, many interviewees mentioned communication difficulties with regard to certain basic definitions and concepts – such as the body, the self, structure, agency, power, culture, society, democracy, and even water and electricity – due to the broad variety of disciplinary influences in development research:

> For example, a sociologically-oriented . . . and an ethno-oriented researcher, two subjects that are very close to each other. Even those have problems if they talk about basic concepts such as society and culture, the basic concepts of their subjects. If I talk about culture, sociologists mean something significantly different than ethnologists. . . . I'll give you an example. I, as an ethnologist, focus, in terms of methods and theories, rather on small sections of human reality – cultural groups, networks, social fields – that can be explored with experiential research. While sociological approaches are rather oriented towards meso- or macro-scales. They thus make statements about, say, the society of Thailand or the society of Indonesia, what most ethnologists would avoid like the devil would avoid holy water. (MaAuGe6)

> It is often difficult to come to an understanding of the definition of what a body actually is. . . . There are, for example, post-structuralist and feminist approaches. And on the other side, there are phenomenological approaches. It already becomes obvious in the terminology. Does one speak of the social body and of the *Leib*, that is the subjective body? Or does one rather take a phenomenological approach, which proceeds very strongly from the subject? Here, body means the objective material body and *Leib* is, so to speak, the inside feel. So, you work with different body definitions and with the same word you often mean completely different levels. (FeAuGe1)

> My colleague has a Platonic understanding of democracy. . . . My starting point is the Enlightenment, with the social contract. Therefore, we have a very different basic paradigm and mean different things when referring to democracy. (FeTh3)

> For instance, I worked with people from electrical or civil engineering on a project concerning the construction of a dam. They count how many megawatts the dam produces, that is, they say, if the dam is operated appropriately, you will get that and that much electricity. So, for them water is a commodity and

> electricity is a commodity. That led to a dispute, because if local people in the area lose their jobs or have to change their occupation because of the dam's construction you cannot just think in price-value ratios, but rather need a non-price thinking. (FeTh3)

What further complicates these semantic complexities is the variety of different regional contexts in which certain concepts are uttered. This is closely related to the first topic of discussion – the fact that most development research evolves in the Global North. As Rigg (2002) highlights, terms likes "participation", "sustainability", "development", or "empowerment" are:

> often coined in the West, translated into local languages, and then transposed onto the local developmental landscape. Western researchers (probably not conversant in the local language) may then find such terms being translated back to them as if they have one and the same meaning in each language. (p. 46)

In other words, the same signifier might not point to the same signified, and the same term can have different context-specific meanings as well as related practices (cf., Stigendal & Novy, 2018).

It hardly needs mentioning that any list of conflicts is non-exhaustive. The controversies described should rather be understood as vignettes – short impressionistic scenes that provide a trenchant impression of the atmosphere in development research – an atmosphere that is pluralistic on several levels. To mention a few, the vignettes identified through the interviews suggest a pluralism on the level of disciplines, regional and cultural contexts, methods (e.g., micro- versus macro-approaches), explanations (e.g., structure versus agency), ethics (e.g., in how far can scholars conduct research in the Global South), semantics (e.g., what is development, society, or the body), theories (e.g., neoclassical economics versus heterodox approaches), and aims (e.g., instrumental research versus a more critical attitude towards interventionism). Although these issues of contestation reflect well the literature on the major characteristics of development research, its conflicts, controversies, and developments (cf., Bernstein, 2007; Harriss, 2002; Kothari, 2016, 2007; Molteberg & Bergstrøm, 2000; Olukoshi & Nyamnjoh, 2007; Rahnema, 1997; Schuurman, 2007; Sumner & Tribe, 2008), the interviews revealed striking differences in the framings of situations of disagreement. This aspect is widely neglected in the literature and will be discussed in the following section.

TRANSDISCIPLINARITY: A WESTERN VENTURE?

It is interesting to note that, unlike my interviews with scholars in Austria and Germany, when speaking with scholars from Thailand, I found it hard to reconstruct a situation of disagreement between *scientific* colleagues. While the Western interviewees drew a picture that seemed capable of demarcating the term 'science' (the signifier) – and, thus, the category of 'scientific colleague' – rather unambiguously from extra-scientific practices (the signified), the interviews with Thai scholars expressed a more ambiguous interpretation of what constitutes 'scientific' (and, thus,

what constitutes a scientific colleague). Compare these interview excerpts from a German and a Thai scholar:

> I think we need to agree on what scientific principles are, and that they are different from principles of religion or other meaning-seeking systems. Science is not concerned with the search for meaning, but with intersubjective knowledge. I think we would need to accept that science does not necessarily have to make you happy, that is not its purpose. Science concerns intersubjective knowledge, which is a specific human activity that is not only Western, but universal. . . . I increasingly see an attitude in our universities such as: science is a system of knowledge on the same level as others. Any wisdom is allegedly just as relevant. . . . Those are dangerous tendencies. (MaAuGe6)

> I have a problem of understanding. What do you mean by scientific? Well, I give you an example and then you can treat it as scientific or not. (MaTh7)

The examples that followed from Thai scholars were primarily reconstructed controversies with policy-makers or other extra-scientific actors.[5] Hence, the interviews suggest that the constitution of the 'other' (the non-scientific) – which is the precondition for the constitution of a 'self' (the "scientific self", cf., Mouffe, 2005) – has a less clear-cut and rigorous meaning in Thailand compared to Austria/Germany. In other words, both the scientific self and the other are more permeable. Different socio-political as well as institutional contexts in Austria/Germany and Thailand provide an explanation for this marked semantic difference.[6] I will address these aspects in the remainder of this section.

Socio-politically, the interviewees from Thailand frequently highlighted the entanglement of their academic lives with the prevailing national politics.[7] All of them explicitly mentioned what none of their Western peers did[8] – that their academic careers cannot be understood without considering political developments in their country:

> I might say that I am not one who intended to be an academic, but, because of the political situation in Thailand, being an academic is quite the best for me, because . . . it gives me enough freedom, academic freedom. . . . I think being an academic is a kind of luxury because people tend to listen to you. So, being an academic means that you can talk. . . . And since my personal background is

5 Those controversies dealt particularly with economics-oriented approaches (which were considered to be in line with national development agendas that privilege technological-fix solutions) versus other, often local, concerns of development, well-being, and livelihood.

6 My mode of reasoning here is abductive, that is, inferring the best explanation. The rather small number of interviews conducted, however, only allows me to suggest a probable explanation. Further research would be needed in order to make claims that are more robust in this regard.

7 An anonymous reviewer suggested the importance of adding that this entanglement is prevalent in Southeast East Asia and not specific to Thailand only. I would like to add that, while this might be true, it is not backed by my empirical data, as I only conducted interviews with Thai scholars. I must therefore refrain from such a generalization – not out of skepticism, but from empirical rigor.

8 Hence, the comparison here refers to what has been said and what has *not* been said (which, by definition, cannot be quoted from interview excerpts).

> involved with social activities and political activism, I intend to give more voice to those who are not heard. (FeTh3)

> I see myself as an academic activist. A kind of hybrid. And this identity has been shaped by the social reality when I came back from my training in the United States. We had to work with local people. In that time, there was a peasant movement, also with NGOs involved. So, we served as advisers, sometimes trainers for them. (MaTh7)

Additionally, the local nature of global challenges (such as social inequality, climate change, and so forth) implies that central societal and environmental problems are "still much more burning here", as a scholar from Thailand (MaTh7) remarked. He continued:

> And here I should add that it is unlike the United States or Europe. . . . In developing countries like Thailand, it is very difficult to separate between theoretical and applied research. We cannot just study the culture, study social relations, and then just write our articles, papers, and go to conferences. But we also have to use anthropological understanding to help us to better understand the transformation that takes place among the underprivileged people here. (MaTh7)

Take, in contrast, the remarks of a European interlocutor:

> We will conduct a workshop soon, where we specifically invite a very small group of academics who come from different schools: from actor-network theory, . . . post-structuralism, phenomenology, feminist approaches. We will provide them with specific questions beforehand to discuss different conceptual understandings and how they overlap. This will be very exciting. (FeAuGe1)

This is by no means to suggest that Western scholars are indifferent about their impact on major societal challenges. Nor does this suggest that there are no burning issues in the Western hemisphere. The central point that I seek to make here is that diverging socio-political contexts affect academic lives, meanings, and practices – and thus the constitution of the 'scientific self' (I understand practices as embodied or incorporated; Reckwitz, 2002).

Institutional differences in academic organizations in Austria/Germany and Thailand respectively add to this argument. They similarly affect one's self-understanding as a scientist and related practices. The literature as well as the interviews point towards different academic practices, and different ways of doing scientific work, in the Global North and Global South. With regard to the Global North, several studies (Felt, Igelsböck, Schikowitz, & Völker, 2013; Schmidt & Pröpper; 2017; Spangenberg, 2011) observe that the existing reward systems in science are actually hostile to transdisciplinary research, since the pressure to 'publish or perish' encourages scholars to focus on their own disciplinary competences and thus to experience transdisciplinary research as an extra burden. Furthermore, as McCargo (2016, p. 111) recognizes, while "in Western societies, mutual respect among academics is derived largely from reputation based upon published work", which is constantly being

reassessed, "in most Southeast Asian societies, this is simply not the case". Status (e.g., having attended a well-known university abroad, or being known to a wider audience beyond academic circles) rather than output "remains the core measure of achievement in most Southeast Asian contexts" (p. 111). Hence, there are differences and variations between academic cultures – what Cribb (2016) termed "circles of esteem". On top of that, due to the financial concerns of often chronically-underpaid researchers in Southeast Asia, many of them "use their spare time to boost their earnings by teaching extra classes (often at other universities), engaging in consultancy, writing for newspapers, appearing on television and radio and running businesses" (McCargo, 2006, pp. 110-111)

Therefore, while being a 'recognized' researcher in the Global North is increasingly measured against the number of publications in high-ranking journals and the accompanying citations, the construction of what it means to be a 'good' scientist seems to follow other paths in Thailand. A lack of English language skills as well as access to journals prevents many Thai social scientists from publishing in international (high-ranking) journals, and thus teaching and other forms of dialogue with, and outreach to, extra-scientific actors take priority:

> Well, again, when you have to work on both teaching and research for these kinds of Key Performance Indicators, but then you also have to work on local issues with the local civil society, it is difficult to sort of catch up with the modern or contemporary cutting-edge theories as American or European researchers do. We sometimes don't even have access to journals. . . . The Social Science Association in Thailand was only established in 1968. . . . But still, until now, there is no real Thai journal, in Thai language. . . . Most of us are, unlike for example Malaysian, Singaporean, or Philippine scholars, not so much equipped with language skills in writing or speaking. Thai anthropologists are less trained in the use of English. So, you do not see so many publications by Thai anthropologists as compared to maybe Singaporeans, or the US, or Taiwanese, or Indian. (MaTh7)

The interviews with Thai scholars in the field of development, therefore, indicate that, due to specific institutional configurations, their use of the signifier 'scientific' corresponds to practices that seem more conducive to extending their space of interaction beyond their academic peer-community. Put differently, the Thai academic self (which is itself a questionable concept that surely lacks differentiation) in the field of development seems to be much less constituted by producing outcomes for scientific peers than by engaging in societal and political debates via interaction with extra-scientific actors. Different practices and related skills are therefore necessary. For example, when asked about his academic career, one interviewee (MaTh4) remarked that he "had a very steep learning curve working with an international NGO in terms of building campaign and communications skills". This once more highlights how the practices, skills, and capabilities constitutive of a scientific self in Thailand (in the field of development) tend to systemically break the mold of what is narrowly defined as scientific in the Global North. Put differently, the signifier 'scientific' signifies different meanings and practices in different socio-political and institutional contexts. This both complicates but also enriches transdisciplinary collaborations, since the current literature on transdisciplinarity does not, quite

intentionally,[9] propose a coherent theory or methodology, but foregrounds different skills that researchers should bring along.

This gives rise to the deeper puzzle of what constitutes 'knowledge' in different contexts. If we follow a pragmatist understanding of knowledge, that is, knowledge (the signifier) is what is useful (the signified), then we clearly see that usefulness varies among different contexts and is deeply entangled with institutional and socio-political differences. In this regard, McCargo (2006) differentiates between three research practices that are embedded in particular institutional arrangements: pragmatic, committed, and idealistic. Pragmatic practices seek to link research agendas "to projects of interest to states or power-holders" in order to "influence policy processes" and to reach a "wider audience" via public intellectualism, newspaper columns, radio comments, or easily accessible books in the local language that are a "kind of political commentary rather than genuine research" (McCargo, 2006, p. 112). Committed practices are more "dedicated to furthering the lot of the underprivileged", making use of academic positions to legitimate "roles as activists and public intellectuals, typically as critics of government policies" (p. 113). Finally, idealist practices are primarily performed to pursue a "personal intellectual agenda" (p. 112) of "pure" research within academic boundaries. McCargo argues that this last category of practice is most dominant in the Western hemisphere, where usefulness is primarily measured against the background of a scientific community. Furthermore, pragmatic practices are said to be most dominant in the Southeast-Asian context, albeit with a "significant minority" (p. 112) of the "committed" type. My own empirical findings confirm these admittedly ideal types, though the "committed" type clearly dominated within my set of interviewees from Thailand (compare the interview excerpts above). Hence, in these socio-political and institutional contexts, knowledge constitutes its usefulness primarily via entering into dialogue with a wider audience, be it local communities or national authorities.

To sum up, if we accept that practices that involve extra-scientific actors are a necessary condition for transdisciplinary endeavors (compare my minimalist definition outlined in the first section), the above discussion draws into question the claims to authority and novelty around the term transdisciplinarity that Western institutions have ascribed to themselves in recent years. Such authority is not least ingrained in European project formats like *Capacity Building in Higher Education Projects* (CBHE, the format through which KNOTS was operationalized). CBHE is characterized by a developmental nature (European Union, 2016) and inherent center-periphery relations, bringing together different (cultural, political, financial, and so forth) backgrounds, hierarchies, and epistemologies as well as diverging interests, incentives, and institutional reward systems (Schmidt & Pröpper, 2017). The notions of 'modernization' and 'convergence' – explicit aims of CBHE (cf. European Commission, 2018) – hint at potential power asymmetries, since such terminology epitomizes the idea that knowledge, skills, and tools would have to be transferred linearly from the Global North towards the Global South and consequently entails geographical temporalizations (those 'others' are 'lagging behind').

9 This is also highlighted in the final summary (KNOTS, 2019) on transdisciplinary research and teaching developed by the KNOTS project: "It is important to emphasize that in our understanding, there is no such thing as a transdisciplinary research methodology or method."

Such logic is, for example, also apparent in funding regulations in which budget for training and re-training purposes is only available for staff members from Partner Countries (Global South) participating in training programs in Program Countries (Global North), but not vice versa. Put polemically, in this logic the 'underdeveloped' institutions of the Global South have to learn from – and converge towards – the 'rational' institutions of the Global North. The idea that Program Countries could learn from the Partner Countries is hardly considered; at most, the former might benefit "indirectly" (European Commission, 2018). It is *inter alia* at this conjuncture where the Western claim to authority and novelty around the term transdisciplinarity takes hold, that is, transdisciplinarity is conceptualized as an innovative and novel Western idea that needs to be 'transferred' to the Global South. This, however, neglects that *practices*[10] central to transdisciplinary endeavors (the signified), in contrast to the Western-coined *term* transdisciplinarity (the signifier), are already present in these contexts – they are already performed.[11]

THE CONTEXTUAL AND PRAGMATIC NATURE OF TRANSDISCIPLINARY WORK: SITUATED JUDGMENTS, COMPROMISES, AND COMPRESSION

The highly pluralistic nature of development research, although provoking many controversies and conflicts, undoubtedly has its benefits. Chang (2012) argues that pluralism in science has the potential for two kinds of benefit: (1) benefits of toleration (hedging bets, dividing domains, satisfaction of different aims, and multiple satisfaction) and (2) benefits of interaction (*ad hoc* integration, co-optation, and competition). For Chang, it would be a wasted opportunity if the second benefits were left unreaped. The interviews substantiate this claim. The importance of interaction amongst different approaches was frequently stressed – all interviewees embraced critical interaction among different approaches and highlighted the necessity of fostering it in practice. Interaction, thus, represents their normative goal.[12] As in the previous section, however, differences between German/Austrian and Thai scholars came to the fore. While the former stressed interaction with academic peers, the latter mainly focused on interaction with policymakers and other extra-scientific

10 See, for example, Thai Baan Research (Chayan, n.d).

11 As a sidenote, I deem it important to stress that the understanding of transferability also runs the danger of pursuing a fallacious technocratic "understanding about scalability through straightforward diffusion of knowledge and best practice from one context to another" (Moulaert & Maccallum, 2019, p. 35), thereby neglecting that "transdisciplinary research methodologies designed for developed [*sic*] world contexts cannot merely be replicated and transferred to developing [*sic*] world contexts" (van Breda & Swilling, 2019, p. 823).

12 The interviews revealed three (institutionalized) possibilities for how such interaction could be enabled, enhanced, and intensified. First, work with students was highlighted as a central opportunity; this may include joint curricula and co-teaching of classes in which different approaches work together towards a common goal, namely productive and fruitful work with students. Second, the problem of current conference settings was discussed. Huge conferences, often with several parallel panels, predominantly preclude possibilities for critical interaction. Small workshops (as well as small reading groups within or among departments) were mentioned as significantly more productive. Lastly, joint project frameworks across disciplines and regions, also including extra-scientific actors, were considered highly beneficial for critical interaction. Crucially, the interviewees stressed that much more financial support must be given to researchers in the Global South to conduct and lead such joint projects in the Global North to counter academic hegemonies that tend to restrict critical interaction.

actors. The juxtaposition of two statements (the first by a Thai scholar, the second by a European one) when the interview turned to ideal forms of interaction exemplifies this difference:

> I mean, I mentioned that I have a background between civil society and academia. And so, I am interested in engaging in these sorts of debates not just commenting on them. (MaTh4)

> I know that there are a few magazines that allow for detailed discussion. For example, an author writes an article, then 20 people are invited to comment, and then you can reply on it again. In such processes, one can learn a lot. (MaAuGe6)

These statements underpin my argument in the previous section concerning the substantial variegations in different circles of esteem.

The normative goal of interaction raises a central question: What are the preconditions for interaction to be possible? Is there a common basis upon which the interactors need to agree? The interviews provided two insights: first, a common basis needs to exist, and second, such a basis is not merely epistemic. The examples given by interviewees when asked about aspects that possible interactors would need to agree upon included ethical working procedures (FeAuGe1), the rejection of inhuman or racist attitudes (FeAuGe2), the goal of emancipation (MaAuGe5), and the rejection of approaches that would justify physical, structural, or cultural violence (FeAuGe3), as well as common visions such as "for the good of society", "for the good of the department" (FeTh3), "for the well-being of the people", or "for a sustainable and inclusive use of resources" (MaTh4). Some interviewees (FeAuGe1, MaTh4, MaAuGe6) also mentioned that sometimes different ontological assumptions or worldviews make interaction almost impossible. In terms of epistemic criteria, almost all interviewees stressed that they could only collaborate with peers if their approaches are open to "empirical surprises", that is theoretical pre-considerations should never determine the outcome of research. Additionally, internal coherence (FeAuGe1), the traceability or transparency of methodical procedures (MaTh4), as well as the requirement of not distorting other positions that one seeks to attack or engage with (MaAuGe6), were stressed.

The abstract nature of these shared principles or desiderata are quite obvious: ethical working procedures, openness to empirical surprises, coherence, transparency, non-distortion, non-racist attitude, emancipation, and non-violence, as well as broad common visions, can be interpreted in very different, often even contradictory, ways. One scholar came straight to the point:

> A common basis would be, well, something like well-being or that people's well-being is important. That would be a shared view. But how to achieve this I think is quite diverse by the interpreters. . . . . I think most interventions would say that 'we are doing this for the good of the people', but that could range from very local civil society groups working with individual communities that say 'well, we're working with the community to protect the way that things are because that's mostly in their interests' all the way to 'we need economic growth in order to improve material well-being, and that's for the good of the country'. (MaTh4)

Thus, shared principles such as well-being allow for a variety of different (and even contradictory) approaches, since their content only becomes determined after situated judgments.[13] Put differently, local (in this case, the field of development research), abstract, and weak meta-standards leave plenty of room for controversy and pluralism – a pluralism among different belief-value systems rather than merely epistemic ones.

At the same time, pluralism is by definition (in terms of both toleration and interaction) based on the precondition that different situated judgments can be expressed and mutually acknowledged. This presupposes self-reflection on the contingency of one's own views, the ability to (at least to some extent) step outside one's own belief-value system. In this context, the centrality of socialization was frequently highlighted in the interviews, since one's own position needs to be understood against the background of "your training" (FeTh3) and often emerges "almost as a coincidence depending on whatever you have picked up in life at some point" (MaAuGe6). "You only understand how research questions form when you examine your academic socialization and the literature that exists there, theoretical but also empirical" (FeAuGe1). Thus, self-reflection is a vital precondition for forms of critical interaction that can, at the least, (1) sharpen each approach "as a response to challenge and criticism", and (2) make the limitations of each approach evident "by the articulation of questions that they are not designed to answer" (Longino, 2006, p. 127). Hence, without a self-reflective attitude as a precondition for mutual recognition, transdisciplinary research cannot be conducted productively. Consequently, we can agree with Breitenbach and Choi (2017), who argue that pluralism "excludes only but all exclusionary projects" (p. 397).

It is, therefore, not enough to agree on shared abstract principles, but concrete situated judgments must be acknowledged in order to make interaction and collaboration possible. All interviewees stressed this precondition, although in different terms. MaAuGe5 differentiated between knowledge for the sake of action or control (*Herrschaftswissen*) and emancipatory research. Interaction and collaboration is only possible within the limits of the latter, since the former excludes other approaches by definition and thus gives no space for emancipatory research. FeAuGe1 made similar

13 The term "situated judgment" implies that judgments always evolve in a particular context or community, that is, they are based on experiences from within a particular thought collective (Fleck, 1935/2012), which molds how reality is perceived. A plurality of such experienced realities thus brings about a multitude of situated judgments. The idea of situatedness is characteristic of all traditions in feminist epistemology, be it standpoint theory, feminist postmodernism, or feminist empiricism (Anderson, 2017). Standpoint theory claims that particular socially-situated perspectives (oppressed perspectives) are in an epistemically-privileged position (cf., Collins, 1986). Feminist postmodernism tends to reject claims of privilege, stressing a radical instability and contingency of social identities and their representations (cf., Butler, 1990). Empiricism "seeks standards . . . for differentiating the circumstances in which situatedness generates error and in which it constitutes a resource that can be harnessed to advance knowledge" (Anderson, 2017, n.p.; cf., Campbell, 1998). Hence, despite their differences all three traditions emphasize locality, partiality, and situatedness. As Haraway (1988), an exponent of standpoint theory, puts it, "I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (p. 589). Objectivity is thus not a view from nowhere, but "views from somewhere" (Haraway, 1988, p. 590).

remarks regarding an academic hegemonism of the Global North. FeAuGe2 noted the impossibility of interaction when the counterpart expresses a kind of "religious belief" in their approach. She further argued that for a fruitful interaction one needs to have particular "constellations of power . . . in which a confrontation can be carried out and taken up by both sides in a way that yields fruitful results". Similarly, MaAuGe6 highlighted that interaction can only work if the opponent engages with one's arguments and criticism rather than insisting upon their standpoint. FeTh3 discussed the problem of power hierarchies in which colleagues "look down" on you, "do not listen", and "only stick with their own idea":

> We might still be friends . . . but we will not debate about our perspectives anymore, because we know that we are different. . . . And in that case, we just say, well, we can be colleagues, but not a peer in a scientific way.

MaTh7 stressed a very similar dilemma that can complicate interaction. He described the problematic power asymmetries between engineering and the social sciences in many research projects: "Usually, the authority would give priority to scientific engineering and technological research". This pushes social science into a sub-role within projects, fulfilling tasks of "lip service" or merely "helping them". Lastly, MaTh4 mentioned problematic hierarchies of ontologies or worldviews in which marginalized voices do not get heard, while an economic-growth paradigm is privileged. Hence, albeit in different terms, all interviewees expressed the necessity of a level playing field for interaction to be possible. Transdisciplinary work cannot allow for exclusionary projects, nor can it allow for dogmatism.

This necessity for inclusiveness, however, does not imply that conflicts dissolve or that the outcome of a disagreement needs to be entirely harmonious. Acknowledging different situated judgments does not imply agreeing with, let alone sharing them:

> I can understand different arguments, for sure. But I don't have to share them. . . . I can comprehend how a certain position came to its understanding, to its view. I can comprehend that if I know, for example, how they have been, so to say, socialized academically. Then I can understand that. But I do not have to share it because of that. (FeAuGe1)

While transdisciplinary research needs to accommodate the goal of including multiple perspectives (both disciplinary and extra-scientific) in the process of knowledge production, thus creating a common framework via giving space to different situated judgments, decisions can and need to be made for a common endeavor to be relevant in practice. Transdisciplinarity, therefore, also needs to embrace the capacity of actors to act in a given context, situation, or environment. In other words, while different – and, potentially, even conflicting – perspectives need to be mutually recognized, a common strategy can only be operationalized by allowing for possibilities of deciding between those conflicting views. This is key to avoiding deadlock and an incapacity or inability of the actors working together in a transdisciplinary framework to act and move forward on a project to produce socially relevant outcomes (for example, by providing viable policy recommendations).

Any form of harmony in transdisciplinary research is, therefore, contextual and pragmatic. It focuses on the practical consequences in a specific context and balances multiple interests and situated judgments in a specific situation. In this context, FeAuGe1, FeAuGe2, and MaTh4 explicitly stressed that harmony, or the dissolution of divergent approaches into one whole, is neither possible nor desirable. "Science, like life, is mostly characterized by conflict." (FeAuGe2) While the pragmatic nature of contextual unity in transdisciplinary research acknowledges these conflicts, it also recognizes the necessity of decisions for the research to be relevant in practice. As Schmidt and Pröpper (2017) put it, "Being realistic about transdisciplinarity requires acknowledging that the (almost romanticized) image of a mutual and equal knowledge co-production is hardly attainable, and indeed blanks out existing hierarchies, spheres of interest, and power structures" (p. 377). Some interests or situated judgments will always need to be sacrificed for others.

Transdisciplinarity should not reject this instrumental necessity, but be all the more reflective on questions of representation (whose voices, knowledge, and expertise counts) and impact (who owns the research output, what impact does it make, and who will benefit). In so doing, it counteracts the tendency towards de-politicization that often comes with promises of unification. MaTh4, for example, noted that attempts at technocratization exemplify such a problematic form of unification, as they explicitly follow an ideal of a-politicized science, thus pursuing an illusion of universalized knowledge.

This is why pluralism is so essential for transdisciplinary research. It is founded on multiple situated judgments – be it of different scientific disciplines, ethnic minorities, women's groups, policymakers, or trade unions, to mention only some – that are ultimately being *compressed* into a common contextual strategy. I suggest that the idea of compression – that is, the establishment of a pragmatic unity in a specific situation or, in other words, the essential ability to make decisions between a plethora of different situated judgments that might be incompatible – is a central practice in transdisciplinary research, related to three interlinked statements expressed by Dupré (1995). First, scientific criteria to distinguish certain parts of reality are "chosen in part for anthropocentric reasons such as ease of human application" (p. 36). Second, "epistemological standards for science" are at least partly normative (p. 243), meaning that scientists' epistemic practices are in some respect influenced or constituted by non-epistemic values. Lastly, and in line with the two former arguments, aiming at universally unified sciences at a single scientific enterprise regardless of local context would require "a society with absolutely homogeneous, or at least hegemonic, political commitments and shared assumptions. . . . [Universally] unified science, we might conclude, would require Utopia or totalitarianism" (p. 261). Compression, thus, is always contextual, partial, pragmatic, and contingent, because "it is not the only possible rational outcome. A different constellation of arguments and situated judgments could have led to a different outcome" (Kinzel & Kusch, 2018, p. 66). Compressive decisions are, in this sense, based on their "pursuit worthiness" in a specific situation. Pursuit worthiness, as opposed to other (often stronger) forms of acceptance, does not concern a retrospective assessment of truth-conduciveness (similar to the traditional idea of theory confirmation), but is an appraisal of heuristic or pragmatic deliberations regarding a research direction's fruitfulness in a specific local situation (Nickles, 2009; Šešelja, 2017).

To sum up, all that inclusiveness in transdisciplinary research can require is that space is given to different situated judgments to be expressed, recognized, and taken seriously. Conflict and the rejection of positions within this space will, however, in most cases be unavoidable. Decisions need to be made. We should, therefore, be critical about ideas of transdisciplinarity that place a strong emphasis on "total systems" (Piaget, 1972), "comprehensiveness" (Molteberg & Bergstrøm, 2000), or "unification and harmony" (Choi & Pak, 2006), particularly if such unity/unification is framed in its most comprehensive sense, this is, "looking for unity in an overarching synthesis in the grand and sweeping manner of Marxism, systems theory, sociobiology, and so on" (Kellert, 2006, p. 219). Instead, more emphasis needs to be placed on partiality, conflict, compromise, and joint contextual strategies (cf., e.g., van Breda & Swilling, 2019).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have sought to (1) provide vignettes of central scientific conflicts and controversies in development research to hint at potential difficulties that may arise in inter- or transdisciplinary endeavors around the notion of development. A plurality of different approaches in terms of disciplines, regional and cultural contexts, methods, explanations, ethics, semantics, theories, and aims were empirically identified. Based on how the interviewees reconstructed their respective controversies in their daily work, I (2) questioned the claim to authority and novelty that Western institutions have built around the term transdisciplinarity (the signifier) – which is nurtured and reinforced through European project frameworks – since institutionalized practices (the signified) in Thailand seem to be more conducive to the inclusion of extra-scientific actors than those in the Global North. Subsequently, I showed that (3) critical interaction within the arena of conflict and controversy represented in (1) is not only a normative goal in development research, but seems also vital to unfold the potentialities of transdisciplinary work.

The abstract nature of a necessary, common basis for interaction, which the interviews highlighted, suggests a focus on diverse, situated judgments that define the concrete content of these abstract meta-standards. Based on my empirical analysis, I argued that transdisciplinary work can only unfold its potentialities when different, situated judgments are acknowledged. This presupposes the ability of self-reflection among those involved. Mutual acknowledgment must, however, not be confused with sharing a particular view or position. If transdisciplinary endeavors aim to induce practical consequences, decisions between different situated judgments are necessary. I termed this process *compression*, which is always contextual, partial, contingent, and pragmatic. Transdisciplinarity's often-held ideals of harmony, comprehensiveness, totality, and unity should, therefore, be replaced by conflict, partiality, compromise, and joint contextual strategies. The idealistic fantasy of transcending one's situatedness thereby gives place to "the art of deliberation" (Novy et al., 2020) as the central competence of transdisciplinary scholars.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Martin Kusch for his helpful feedback on several (extended) versions of this article, Sarah Ware for her comments on my final draft, two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions, as well as John Billingsley for proofreading the accepted version of this article.